

The Indian American Voter

By CAITLIN FENNERTY

Young and old on the campaign trail for U.S. presidential candidates.

Since 1956, when Dalip Singh Saund became the first Indian American elected to the U.S. Congress—after a hard-fought battle to rescind a law prohibiting people born in Asia from becoming U.S. citizens—Indian Americans have gained a stronger voice in politics. Even though Indian Americans account for only 2.5 million among the 300 million U.S. citizens, their political influence is growing.

The Indian community now understands that it will have to be involved in the political process, says Meera Gandhi, a Manhattan philanthropist and socialite. “We are the new, wealthy kids on the block, so to speak. We feel we should have a stake in our country’s politics,” she told the *New York Sun*. In 2007, Republican Congressman Bobby Jindal was elected governor of Louisiana; Neera Tanden, Senator Hillary Clinton’s senior policy adviser during her campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, has now joined the camp of Barack Obama, as the senator’s domestic policy director; and Hollywood actor Kalpen Modi, also known as Kal Penn, is putting his career on hold to campaign for Obama.

Not surprisingly, both the Democratic and Republican parties have been reaching out to Indian American voters. Says Sanjay Puri, chairman of the Washington, D.C.-based U.S. India Political Action Committee (USINPAC), a national bipartisan organization: “The Indian American community is a very prosperous and well educated one that



Above: Michelle Obama with Surabhi Garg of the U.S. India Political Action Committee at a fundraiser in Chicago, Illinois.

Above right: Actor Kal Penn (right) works as a floor whip at the Democratic National Convention in Denver, Colorado.



is passionately engaged in the public space and in the American political process.” The group estimates that Indian Americans will contribute \$20 million during the current presidential campaign.

Many Indian Americans are actively involved in fundraising efforts for the two major political parties. Some 300,000 Indian Americans in California’s Silicon Valley are credited with having had a significant impact on campaign financing for both the Clinton and Obama campaigns. Sant Chatwal, a New York hotelier and restaurant owner, formed Indian Americans for Hillary 2008 and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for her White House bid. After Barack Obama’s victory in the

fight for the Democratic nomination, Chatwal pledged to raise \$10 million.

The children of the politically awakened first generation of Indian Americans—the major immigration wave began in the 1960s—will also be influential in the future. According to the U.S. census, half of Asian Americans are younger than 29, and of these, Indian Americans are the fastest growing ethnic group, with an annual growth rate of 10.5 percent. Voters in the age group of 18 to 30 now number 50 million, about a quarter of the electorate. Daniel Schorr, a senior news analyst and commentator for National Public Radio, finds it “electrifying” that more young people have expressed a desire to vote in this year’s election than before. Increased voter turnout among young people in 2008, as shown during the primary season, is an “important new fact,” says Schorr. The youth vote could decide the election, he says. Polls suggest a majority of young Americans support Obama over John

For more information:

Indian American Forum for Political Education

<http://www.iafpe.org/>

U.S. India Political Action Committee

<http://www.usinpac.com/>

McCain, the Republican Party candidate.

Indian Americans have historically supported Democratic over Republican candidates. But that is changing. *India Abroad* reported in February 2008, that while 60 per cent of Indian Americans are still Democrats, 40 per cent are Republicans, the highest percentage so far. And the Republicans see an opportunity to draw support from this ethnic group. Jay Nordlinger, senior editor of *National Review*, recently wrote in the bi-weekly, conservative maga-

zine that “Indian Americans are entrepreneurial, hard-working, striving, traditionalist, family-oriented, religious, assimilationist, patriotic—what could be better? And what are their issues? They are proponents of pro-business, low tax, pro-trade policy making, and free trade, which includes a robust defense of outsourcing.” Nordlinger says these values are enshrined in the Republican policy platforms.

grows, the Indian American support to both political parties will be balanced equally.” The U.S. India Political Action Committee’s Puri says this election has brought out the second generation, which has historically stayed away. “I think this is a testament to Senator Obama, who has gone out for the second generation of Indian Americans, just as he has done with so many other young people in very different communities. His appeal to the young population is just tremendous.”

from an international one.”

But Raghav Dhawan, 21, of Claremont McKenna College in California, is leaning heavily toward McCain. He is most concerned about the war in Iraq and trade. He believes these issues are closely tied to America’s relationship with the rest of the world and feels that McCain would strengthen those relationships. “He is sympathetic on immigration and moderate on global warming. He believes outsourcing is the natural result of free market forces and would follow Bush on supporting the nuclear deal,” says Dhawan.

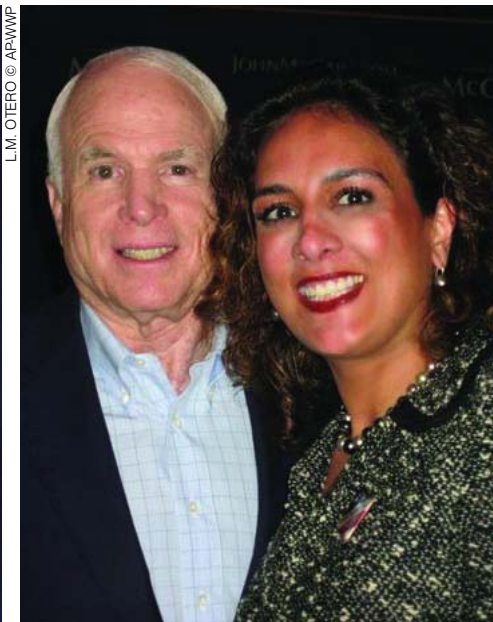
Others, like Jay Raghavan, a student at the University of Pennsylvania, see strengths in each candidate on specific issues. He likes Obama’s stand on Iraq, but prefers McCain’s on trade and international economics.

Indian American youth are not just forming opinions but are also actively participating in politics, raising funds, joining in campaigns and volunteering. Data from the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, based at Tufts University in Massachusetts, suggests that among the youth, Asian Americans are the most politically active ethnic group. In 2006, 54 percent of young Asian Americans reported volunteering. In addition, a little over one-third of 18- to 29-year-old Asian American citizens turned out to vote in 2004, the largest voter turnout of Asian Americans in that age group since 1972, when such voting data began to be collected.

The politically awakened first generation has pressed upon its children the importance of being involved in the political process. “Being from the largest democracy in the world, the Indian people have a long history with the democratic process and understand the value of their right to vote,” says Florida Congressman Gus Bilirakis, a member of the Congressional Caucus on India and Indian Americans and the House Subcommittee on Middle East and South Asia. “Thus, when it comes to their participation in the election of America’s next president, Indian Americans share in the dual heritage of their ancestors in India and that of their home country here in the United States.”



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Above left: Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal campaigns for John McCain in Kenner, Louisiana.

Above: McCain with Harmeet Dhillon, Republican candidate for the California State Assembly from the 13th Assembly District.

The millennial youth—those under 30—are the most diverse American generation in history, with almost 40 percent identifying themselves as a minority. Natasha Lal, 19, of Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, says, “My affinity toward Obama springs from the fact that he is the underdog. He didn’t come from an upper crust white American family, and being (myself) in the minority, it is reassuring to see that anything is possible.”

Arjun Seth, 22, also of Emory, says Obama seems “more convincing than McCain, especially given that he lived in Indonesia and thus would be more likely to understand and view a policy from not only an American perspective, but also

Narender Reddy, a pioneer fundraiser for the Republican Party in Georgia and president of the Indian American Forum for Political Education, an organization dedicated to encouraging political activism among Indian Americans, says that “while 95 percent of the first generation routinely supported the Democratic Party, I see a change in the second generation. They are more open to considering the Republican Party. I would guess that at least about 30 percent of the second generation is supporting the Republican Party. I strongly believe, as the number of the second generation

grows, the Indian American support to both political parties will be balanced equally.”